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ABSTRACT

Findings and recommendations of the New York State Senate Committee on Investigations and Taxes are provided from an examination of adult illiteracy in New York State to estimate its extent and cost, to evaluate existing efforts, and to develop new approaches to reduce it. Findings show that there are approximately 2,040,000 functionally illiterate New York residents over the age of 18, that they cost the state millions of dollars in welfare payments and unrealized tax revenues, that the state has failed to allocate funds for literacy programs, and that the State Board of Regents has avoided its responsibility for setting educational policy and priorities. These recommendations are made: the Board of Regents should assign a higher priority to combatting adult illiteracy; the state should provide more funds; colleges should offer incentives to student tutors of adult illiterates; and the State Department of Education should cooperate with other agencies and institutions to combat illiteracy, develop a mentor system, and develop programs using computers and public access cable television. The report also contains a definition and demographic breakdown of illiteracy, a more detailed examination of the failure of leadership evinced by the Board of Regents, specifics on the cost of illiteracy (cost to the state, future savings, the cost to private industry), and case histories of two former illiterates. (YLB)

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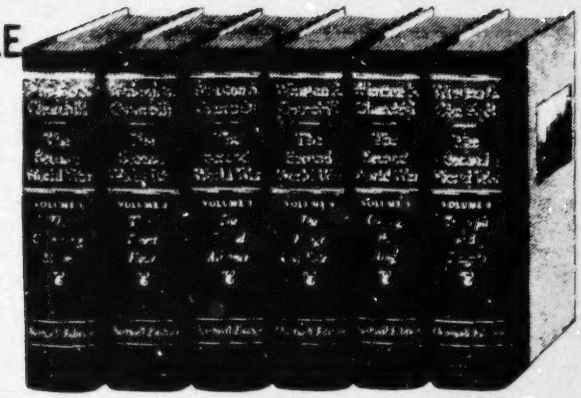

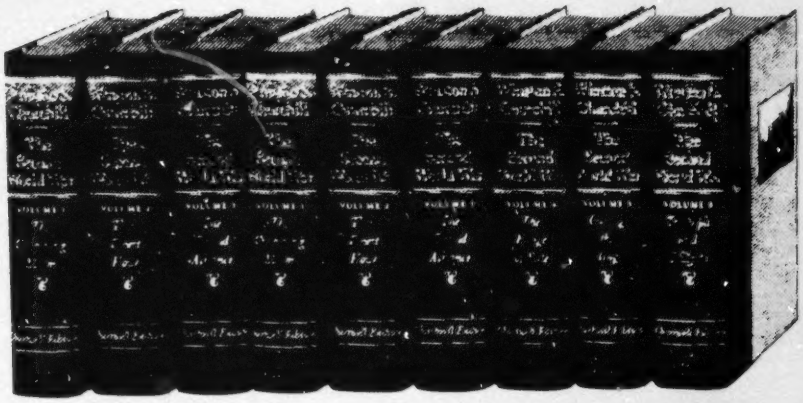

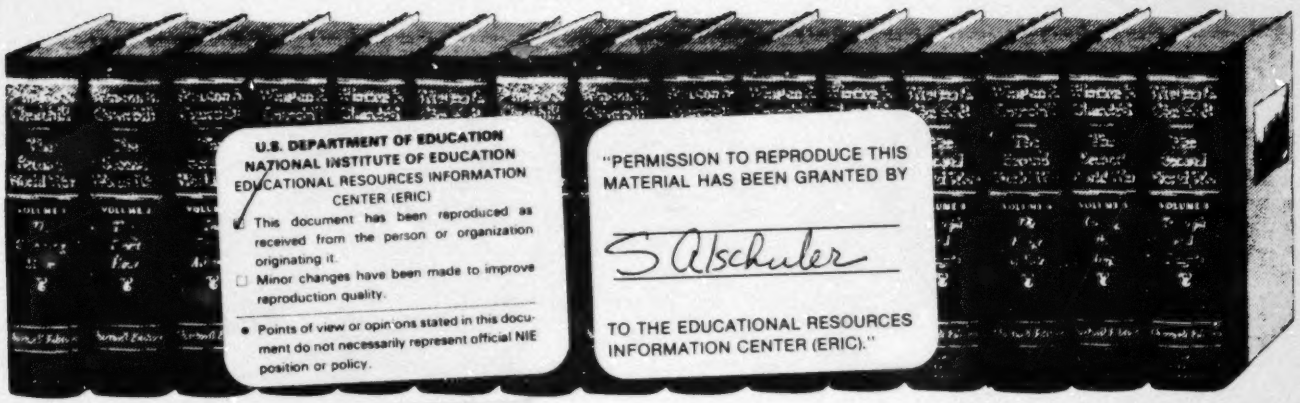

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SENATE COMMITTEE ON INVESTIGATIONS AND TAXATION

ADULT ILLITERACY IN NEW YORK STATE -- A HIDDEN DISGRACE

March 26, 1984

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INTRODUCTION

Although New York State spends more for education on a per-pupil basis than any other state in the nation except Alaska, there are now over 2 million adults in New York State who are functionally illiterate. They cannot read newspapers, books, bus schedules, employment applications, instructions on medication, simple traffic warnings, or even street signs. They often cannot obtain jobs, vote intelligently, or help their children with homework. These are not people with physical handicaps or learning disabilities. They are normal, mature adults who have simply never learned to comprehend the written word. Many possess above average intelligence and have gone through the public school system.

It is clear that New York State has a great financial interest -- apart from a deep moral obligation -- in the fight against adult illiteracy. Millions of taxpayers' dollars are spent to support illiterates who are unemployed, on the welfare rolls, or in prison. Huge sums are also lost each year by businesses as a result of illiteracy among their employees. Of course, these costs are passed on to consumers in the form of higher prices.

In the face of this alarming situation, the Senate Committee on Investigations and Taxation has conducted an

examination of adult illiteracy in New York State, with the following goals:

-- to estimate its extent;

-- to estimate its cost;

-- to evaluate existing efforts to deal with it;

-- to develop new approaches to reduce it.

On December 14, 1983, the committee held a public hearing to examine these issues. Among the witnesses who testified were Mayor Edward I. Koch; Anthony Alvarado, Chancellor of the New York City Board of Education; top officials from the State Department of Education; other experts in the field of adult education; and some adult illiterates who gave poignant personal case histories.

Following are the committee's findings and recommendations.

FINDINGS

1) According to the New York State Department of Education, there are 2,040,000 New York State residents over the age of 18 who are functionally illiterate.

2) Adult illiteracy costs the state many millions of dollars in welfare payments and unrealized tax revenues.

3) Adult illiteracy among employees costs businesses in New York State many millions of dollars each year.

4) The State of New York budget fails to allocate the necessary funds to permit local boards of education and other community based organizations to attack meaningfully this large-scale problem. New York Spends only 72 cents per pupil on adult illiteracy programs compared to a national average of $6.55.

5) The State Board of Regents, which is responsible for setting educational policy and priorities in the State of New York, has largely abnegated its responsibilities in this critical area. Its adult illiteracy programs are given low priority and its allocation of funds is pitifully inadequate.

6) There are more than 20,000 New Yorkers on waiting lists for entry into literacy training programs and they are only the tip of the iceberg.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1) The New York State Board of Regents should assign a high priority to combatting adult illiteracy. As the principal educational policy setters for the state, the Board must design a serious, broad scale initiative to teach over 2 million adults how to read. If the Regents don't move, there is little likelihood that the rest of the state can be aroused.

2) New York State should fund within its $6 billion education budget no less than $10 million in each of the next 3 school years for an all out war on adult illiteracy. These funds could provide literacy courses for the 20,000 illiterate adults on waiting lists at the rate of $1,500 per year per illiterate. Because school years run from July 1 to June 30 and the state's fiscal years run from April 1 to March 31, these funds would be appropriated at the rate of $7 million in fiscal year 1984-85; $10 million in fiscal year 1985-86; and $10 million in fiscal year 1986-87.

3) The State Department of Education should work in close cooperation with the New York Public Library, other state public library systems, and community based voluntary organizations (such as Literacy Volunteers of New York) to utilize their excellent and effective programs to combat illiteracy. Often, a non-school setting with its informal environment is less threatening to the already battered self-esteem of the adult illiterate.

4) Colleges in the state should provide financial aid in the form of work-study grants to students in return for their tutoring adult illiterates.

5) Colleges in the state should grant academic credit to students who tutor adult illiterates.

6) The State Department of Education should develop a "mentor system," encouraging retired professionals, senior citizens with teaching skills, and others with a talent for teaching to tutor adult illiterates.

7) School administrators should increase their efforts to identify students with reading problems while they are still in the school system and provide them with special intensive tutoring. This program can be financed out of available funds.

8) The State Department of Education should develop new programs using computer-teaching techniques and public access cable television to augment existing literacy training efforts.

ILLITERACY -- DEFINITION AND DEMOGRAPHICS

For statistical purposes, the New York State Department of Education classifies individuals over the age of 18, who have not completed eight years of education, as functionally illiterate. Using information from the 1980 Census, the Department of Education has concluded that there are now 2,040,238 illiterate individuals in the State of New York.

The Department of Correctional Services advised the committee that approximately 9,000 of the 31,000 inmates in New York State prisons, or 29%, are illiterate. Of these 9,000, 3,500 are enrolled in literacy training courses. The department spends approximately $3 million on these courses.

The following table provides a demographic breakdown of illiteracy.*

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* All statistics in this report refer to illiteracy in English.

NUMBER OF ILLITERATE INDIVIDUALS IN NEW YORK STATE 18 YEARS OF AGE AND OLDER

ACCORDING TO THE NEW YORK STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

BASED UPON 1980 CENSUS INFORMATION

	Total New York State*	New York City*	Rest of New York State*
Total Population	12,870,209	5,306,172	7,564,037
Illiterate	2,040,238 (15.9%)	1,097,970 (20.7%)	942,268 (12.5%)
Total Non-Black, Non-Hispanic	10,278,635	3,260,680	7,017,955
Illiterate	1,433,872 (14.0%)	594,503 (18.2%)	839,369 (12.0%)
Total Black, Non-Hispanic	1,529,722	1,142,902	386,820
Illiterate	256,871 (16.8%)	190,528 (16.7%)	66,343 (17.2%)
Total Hispanic	1,061,852	902,590	159,262
Illiterate	349,495 (32.9%)	312,939 (34.7%)	36,556 (23.0%)

* All figures represent individuals 18 years of age or older only.

THE BOARD OF REGENTS -- A FAILURE OF LEADERSHIP

The New York State Board of Regents is responsible for setting educational policies and priorities for the state. Unfortunately, the Regents have done little to combat adult illiteracy.

Their recently issued report, entitled "Priority Activities for the Regents and the State Department of Education July 1983 Through June 1984" gives a pitifully low priority to this massive problem.

Nowhere in its 22 areas of activity does the Board of Regents mention illiteracy and not until it reaches items 14 and 15 in its list of priorities does it discuss funding for adults who lack high school diplomas, support of Education Information Centers, strengthening of library and other cultural resources and additional funding for basic skills instruction for unemployed youth and adults.

The Board of Regents does mention illiteracy in a more detailed report entitled "Major Recommendations of the Regents for Legislative Action 1984." However, the applicable section, on "Adult Learning," is the shortest section in the report.

The final recommendation includes a budget request for a mere $2 million, to be combined with federal funds, for "Basic Education for Welfare Recipients."

This $2 million would only be enough to provide services for approximately 1,400 illiterates, barely

denting the 20,000 person waiting list and certainly not beginning to deal with the 2 million other New Yorkers who are illiterate.

We believe the Regents must take a vigorous leadership role in the definition and the solutions to this most pressing education problem which affects one out of every six New Yorkers.

THE COST OF ILLITERACY

The Cost to the State

In fiscal year 1982-83, spending on adult education for illiteracy in New York State totaled approximately $12 million, of which the state paid $4.2 million and the federal government paid $7.8 million. This places New York State far below the national average for spending on adult education for illiteracy. New York State spends 72 cents per pupil on these programs compared to a national average of $6.55. In the coming fiscal year, Governor Cuomo proposed increasing the state's expenditure by $2 million to $6.2 million. This proposal falls painfully short of what is necessary to make a meaningful impact on the adult illiteracy problem.

The state must provide sufficient funds to educate the 20,000 illiterate adults on waiting lists around the state and the thousands of others who would come forward if programs were available. Cost benefit analyses of the literacy programs in existence demonstrate conclusively that government expenditures in this area have generated excellent returns.

In the last four years, state and federal spending on illiteracy totaled $45.8 million (see table on page 14). During that same time period, achievements attributable to literacy training -- leaving the welfare rolls, obtaining a first job, receiving an increase in salary -- have resulted in new tax revenues and government savings of

$86.8 million. Thus, every dollar spent on literacy training produced a return of $1.89.

According to the State Department of Education, literacy training programs last year enabled 2,545 former illiterates to leave the welfare rolls. Based on an average annual welfare grant of $6,779, these successful students saved the state $17.3 million last year.

Also, the department estimates that, including those who had been on welfare, 4.238 graduates of literacy programs obtained jobs and another 2,403 received promotions or salary increases as a result of their training. Assuming a $7,000 annual income (minimum wage) for each individual who obtained a job, governments at all levels received an additional $5.3 million in tax revenues last year.

The department hypothesizes that if each of the workers who received promotions obtained a 10-cent an hour wage increase, or only $200 per year, it would have produced new tax revenues of $86,508.

Therefore, an investment last year on adult education of $12.3 million produced new revenue in the amount of $22.7 million.

Future Savings

According to the Department of Education there were 27,409 adults enrolled in literacy training programs in the 1982-83 school year. Another 20,000 individuals were on waiting lists to enter such programs.

Of those currently in programs, the vast majority are between the ages of 16 and 44. More than 40% are unemployed and about 16%, or 4,385, are receiving public assistance. Were those individuals on public assistance to leave public assistance as a result of their literacy training, it would result in a saving to the state of almost $30 million. This does not begin to take into consideration the additional tax revenues that would be realized when many of these individuals obtain jobs and pay taxes.

It is clear that expenditures on adult education are among the most cost-effective that can be made.

New York City's Response

In the year prior to its fiscal crisis in 1975, the City of New York allocated $2 million to the Board of Education for adult literacy programs. That appropriation was eliminated because of a shortage of funds and has not been restored.

In his testimony before the committee on December 14, 1983, Mayor Koch acknowledged the importance of increased funding for adult literacy training and said he would consider restoring funds to the city budget for that purpose. However, when the Mayor presented his 1984-85 budget, he failed to provide any funds for adult literacy training.

IMPACT OF MONEY SPENT ON ADULT LITERACY TRAINING

Source: New York State Department of Education

	1979-80	1980-81	1981-82	1982-83	TOTAL
(1) Total Spending for Illiteracy Programs	$11,259,026	$10,219,000	$11,905,020	$12,373,571	$45,756,617
New Tax Revenue from:					
(2) Individuals Obtaining Jobs	$ 2,957,220	$ 5,037,480	$ 5,754,420	$ 5,339,880	$19,089,000
(3) Promotions	$ 53,460	$ 65,232	$ 271,764	$ 86,508	$ 476,964
(4) Savings from Individuals Leaving Welfare Rolls	$22,892,683	$15,449,341	$11,659,880	$17,252,555	$67,260,459
(5) Total Savings & New Revenues (Lines 2 + 3 + 4)	$25,903,363	$20,552,053	$17,686,064	$22,678,943	$86,820,423
(6) Net Gain (Line 5 - Line 1)	$14,644,337	$10,333,053	$ 5,781,044	$10,305,372	$41,063,806
(7) Percent Return on Investment (Line 5 ÷ Line 1)	230.1%	201.1%	148.6%	183.3%	189.7%

THE COST TO PRIVATE INDUSTRY

Mayor Koch testified that illiteracy in New York is often a factor in corporate location decisions. Businesses are not inclined to open offices in areas where it is difficult to find employees who possess basic skills. The Mayor said that he has been told by business executives that they are hiring more suburbanites than New York City residents for city-based jobs.

New York businesses spend $1.5 billion annually to provide basic skills training to employees who have not received such training in the schools. Millions of dollars are lost each year by businesses as a result of illiteracy among their employees. These costs are passed on to consumers in the form of higher prices.

A 1983 study by the Center for Public Research, entitled "Basic Skills in the U.S. Work Force" detailed the cost to business of illiteracy among their employees. Corporate executives surveyed in the report said that as a result of a lack of basic skills among employees general productivity was down and management and supervisory costs were up. They said that product quality was down and that greater amounts of time and effort are now required to improve worker skills.

Although the companies surveyed were not identified in the report, two reported spending over $250,000 a year on supervisory and training costs. A third noted the rapidly growing need to train new workers in basic skills. Whereas ten years ago it had one individual responsible for training employees it now has six full-time and 20 part-time trainers as well as several consultants.

CASE HISTORIES

A great many illiterates have been students in the New York school system for years. How can a student go through years of schooling and remain illiterate? In attempting to answer this question, the committee heard testimony from two former illiterates. Following are excerpts from the testimony of Peter Nardone, age 26, born and raised in Queens.

"My problem began in the second grade, when I discovered I had a little bit of a difficulty with reading. I brought it to the attention of my teacher and she said, "Don't worry about it." When reading time came, after a while, she seen (sic) I had this difficulty, she said, "Lie your head down and relax"...

"I was promoted to the third grade. I immediately told my third grade teacher. I don't know if she disbelieved me or just ignored me, but she said, "Don't worry about it. Just do your best." I was left back in the third grade ..., and told my second third grade teacher of this problem and (she said) "Do your best."

"It had seemed very definite to me that my pleas were falling upon deaf ears. So upon my promotion to fourth grade..., upon entering into the school... I knocked on the principal's door... and I brought to the attention of this gentleman that I had a very bad...reading problem. He... pulled a fourth grade reader off of his library shelf and he asked me to read whatever I could."

"Well, at this time, I was unable to read one single word in that book. He told me to report to the fourth grade class that he was assigning me to. I immediately made it known to him that I had suffered a great deal of embarrassment and humiliation and I was not about to let this go on.... He simply told me, 'Get up to the class before you're late.'"

Hopelessly frustrated, Mr. Nardone finally left school and sought employment. Being articulate and presentable, he said he had very little difficulty finding

a job. When faced with a written employment application he would bring a literate friend along on the interview who would secretly fill out the application for him.

At the age of 23, on his own accord, he contacted the Literacy Volunteers of New York City and began receiving literacy training. Two years later, with their help, Mr. Nardone is considered literate.

Another former illiterate, Ms. Eva Jackson, a 44 year old woman from New York City, testified to a similar experience.

"During the time I was going to public school, none of the teachers actually ... paid too much attention to me not knowing how to read. ...."

"They gave me tests .... I didn't get any of the answers or anything right on the tests ..., but they continued to pass me from grade to grade, and then I graduated from public school into high school, and no one never even noticed that I didn't know how to read.... I never did graduate from high school. I just stopped high school and went to work."

Like Mr. Nardone, Ms. Jackson eventually contacted Literacy Volunteers. She concluded: "I accomplished quite a bit more I think in three years that I was with Literacy Volunteers than the whole time I was in school."

INDIVIDUALS INTERVIEWED AND WITNESSES AT PUBLIC HEARING

Winthrop Adkins, Professor, Teachers College, Columbia University.

Anthony Alvarado, Chancellor, New York City Board of Education.

Gordon Berlin, Ford Foundation.

Jacqueline Cook, Co-chair, Coalition of Adult Education Providers.

Paul V. Delker, Director, Division of Adult Education, U.S. Department of Education.

Frederick Dunn, Director of Education, Local 237, International Brotherhood of Teamsters.

Maude P. Goldston, Associate Director of Adult Education, Department of Education, Commonwealth of Virginia.

Eva Jackson, graduate, Literacy Volunteers of New York City.

Dianne Kangisser, Executive Director, Literacy Volunteers of New York City.

Edward I. Koch, Mayor, New York City.

Maurice Leiter, Director of Program Development, United Federation of Teachers.

Lawrence Levin, President, New York Association of Continuing/Community Education, Inc.

Donald McCune, Director of Adult Education, California State Department of Education.

Garrett Murphy, Director, Division of Continuing Education, New York State Education Department.

Peter Nardone, graduate, Literacy Volunteers of New York City.

John Nuttall, Assistant Director of Education, New York State Department of Correctional Services.

Marian Schwarz, Director of Youth Services, Office of the Mayor, New York City.

Helen Weinberg, Director, Office of Continuing Education, New York City Board of Education.

RESEARCH REPORTS

Adult Literacy Education Program Participant Data 1980-81, New York State Department of Education.

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Basic Skills in the U.S. Work Force, Center for Public Resources, New York, 1983.

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